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STUDIES IN GOTHIC FICTION

Women and the Gothic, edited by Avril
Horner and Sue Zlosnik, Edinburgh
UP, 2016. 239 pages, \$120.

ISBN 978-0-7486-9912-4

by Kathleen Hudson

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The Gothic has long existed as a mode that both facilitates creative and critical expression for women and interrogates their place in literary culture as figures representing and resisting generic tropes. With the recent re-evaluations of feminism as a broad literary critique and as a series of interconnected yet distinct political and social movements, it has become particularly important to reconfigure the Gothic mode's place within contemporary discourses. To this end, *Women and the Gothic*, a collection edited by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, re-assesses Gothic literature, film, and new media in terms of political and critical definitions of women, femininity, and feminism. An investigation of the fluid boundaries of such definitions and their impact on past and future readings of the Gothic forms the underlying narrative of this collection, while individual chapters anchor specific texts within the larger critical framework. This edited collection is one of the latest contributions to the Edinburgh Companions to the Gothic Series, a series edited by Andrew Smith and William Hughes that aims to present a comprehensive overview of the Gothic while maintaining distinct thematic critical identities in each individual work. *Women and the Gothic* offers readers a new take on concepts of the female, femininity, political, and social feminist movements and the literary legacies of "Women's Gothic" while fitting snugly within broader criticism.

Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik position Second-wave feminism (traditionally defined as the feminist developments of the 1960s-1980s) as a critical starting point, one which is then tested by the ambiguities of the Gothic and by the emergence of post-feminism and Fourth-wave feminism. Tapping into a range of research topics, *Women and the Gothic* sets out to facilitate a nuanced reading of feminist theory

without ignoring the social, political, and literary limitations therein. The work manages to create a very broad narrative of gender without losing sight of the central issues which define Gothic criticism.

The collection fittingly begins with the section "Part I: Family Matters," focusing on Gothic origins and the ways in which women do and do not fit within traditional roles. Angela Wright examines the birth of the Gothic heroine in "Heroines in Flight: Narrative Invisibility and Maturity in Women's Gothic Writing of the Romantic Period," introducing themes of commercialized femininity and ageism in order to provide insight into core early Gothic texts while laying the groundwork for the application of contemporary discourses. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas continues this push to redefine established modes in his essay, "Madwoman and Attics," the title itself suggesting one of the most famous feminist critical works. Talairach-Vielmas recasts the "madwoman" trope as an expression of uncanny liminal identity, examining Romantic and Victorian works such as *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White* in terms of social and legal powerlessness and in the context of the medical developments of the period. Ginette Carpenter has a similar strategy in "Mothers and Others," reading uncanny motherhood through the paradigms of Julia Kristeva, among others, in order to compare the films *Prometheus* and *We Need To Talk About Kevin* in terms of post-feminist anxieties. Lucie Armitt's essay, "The Gothic Girl Child," is a fascinating survey of depictions of uncanny children as sites of transgressive desire and one which ultimately concludes that such depictions are often "disappointingly" consistently punitive for young women. Diana Wallace's work, "A Woman's Place," the final essay in this section, redefines the post-war domestic space in terms

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of the “dark arts” and witchcraft, and contains important implications for the recent re-evaluations of “witches” in feminist Gothic discourses.

“Part II: Transgressions” centers on alternative manifestations of the female, re-categorizing feminine identity in terms of physical, moral, legal, and supernatural representations while linking these identities back to central anxieties about the place and role of women. Anne Williams follows up on the previous section with her own study of witches in early Gothic texts, firmly establishing the origins and entomology of “Wicked Women” and examining unconventional source texts such as Alexander Pope’s “Eloisa to Abelard.” Marie Mulvey-Roberts provides a survey of the demonized female body in and interrogates its implications for patriarchal systems in her essay, “The Female Gothic Body,” with especially interesting readings of the Bluebeard and Frankenstein mythologies. “Spectral Femininity” by Rebecca Munford applies Derrida’s “hauntology” to texts by Daphne De Maurier and Shirley Jackson before reconfiguring the issue through Ali Smith’s postmodern *Hotel World*. Sue Chaplin, whose work on Gothic legal identities remains unparalleled, contextualizes contemporary anxieties about legal identities and gender equality in a still predominately patriarchal “post-feminist” landscape in her chapter “Female Gothic and the Law.” Gina Wisker’s piece, “Female Vampirism,” wraps up this section by departing from typical readings of the female vampire and exploring how such figures destabilize the Gothic. She compares films such as *Byzantium* and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* with representations of vampires in Victorian fiction and identifies Angela Carter’s works as particularly game-changing.

The final section of the collection is entitled, “Part III: New Directions,” and, as the name suggests, this chapter constitutes the most comprehensive look forward towards developing feminist criticism and new modes of Gothic storytelling. Ardel Haefele-Thomas, in “Queering the Female Gothic,” incorporates queer theory into an evaluation of various threads of Second-wave feminism and indeed argues that the choice of the Gothic mode for lesbian authors and authors of color offers an alternative to essentialist and / or historically-determined identities. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik’s contribution to the collection, “No Country for Old Women: Gender, Age and the Gothic,” similarly addresses a very troubling issue for contemporary feminism and one that has been a source of debate regarding the movement’s successes and failures. Ageism in the Gothic in terms of

female consumerism, queer theory, and the grotesque is examined through the lens of feminist theory, offering insight into the social and literary marginalization of women of a certain age. The final two chapters of the work contemplate the future of femininity in Gothic technologies, examining new Gothic modes in virtual media and literature and the implications of the “post-human” subject. Catherine Spooner’s “Virtual Gothic Women” discusses women’s complex relationship with technology in Gothic literature through an interrogation of concepts of “embodiment” and “disembodiment” in virtual spaces. Tracing texts by authors from Arthur Machen to Scarlett Thomas, this chapter interrogates Cartesian mind and body dualism in terms of the female subject and feminist critique. It is an interesting companion piece to the final chapter, “Formations of Player Agency and Gender in Gothic Games,” by Tanya Krzywinska, which interrogates concepts of female agency in the highly ambiguous space of Gothic games such as *Phantasmagoria*, *Primal*, and *American McGee’s Alice*. Krzywinska returns to core authors such as Radcliffe, Carter, and Whedon while offering fascinating insight into the potential implications of Gothic femininity within gaming and consumerist identity.

This collection achieves its goals in two ways: by linking long-established Gothic criticisms in innovative ways to feminist movements and to feminism as critical theory, and by examining new areas that have received relatively little attention and that need to be incorporated more fully in female Gothic literary criticism. Horner and Zlosnik identify “the negative way in which women are conceptualized in many cultures” as a core source for the anxieties that women and men have felt and continue to feel regarding gender stereotypes, agency, and oppression – and indeed, the Gothic mode in particular is responsible for many of the myths, both positive and negative, that have constructed cultural identities up to the present day (11).

Such a collection does require a relatively narrow thematic focus in order to incorporate all the nuances therein, though perhaps one of the most noteworthy issues currently being interrogated in terms of modern feminism is that of intersectionality. Wright and Horner and Zlosnik’s essays in particular do an excellent job of incorporating issues of ageism into critical Gothic feminism. Ardel Haefele-Thomas’s chapter “Queering the Female Gothic,” and other chapters throughout the collection also draw significant attention to feminism’s relationship with queer theory. However, women of color as characters and authors and race-based discussions

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of Gothic feminism more generally are mostly absent in this collection, though Haefele-Thomas does briefly discuss minority characters and authors. In spite of this, the text provides a solid basis for the incorporation of new areas of intersectional criticism in future feminist Gothic readings.

Horner and Zlosnik, in their selection of essays, incorporate complex and ambiguous feminist critiques to illuminate the ways in which definitions of “women” and “the Gothic” have developed in tandem from the eighteenth century to the present day. It is the forward-looking scope of this edited collection that makes it most notable among collections on “Women’s Gothic,” as well as its willingness to question how we define notions of the female and the developments of women in literary discourse. Even familiar, foundational arguments are redefined within this new topic and linked more comprehensively to developing criticism. The collection captures the ambiguity of women characters within texts, women writers, and the parameters of feminism and literature more generally, while never losing sight, even when there is reason for pessimism, on the potential for new avenues for women in the Gothic.